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ABSTRACT

An association between disturbed interpersonal relations and poor adjustment has often been found among college students. In particular, students' roommates have a substantial effect on their university experiences. To test the effectiveness of preventive intervention in improving roommate relationships, 79 college students participated in a relationship skills workshop designed to improve the community social network in the residence halls. Groups were led by resident assistants from within the community. Pre-, post-, and follow-up assessments were collected from the 79 experimental and 136 control subjects. The level of communication between roommates was found to be significantly related to adjustment, competence, relationship quality, and perceptions of the social environment. Workshop participation significantly improved communications between roommates. The findings suggest that relationship skills workshops within a residential community may facilitate students' adjustment in college and the development of interpersonal competence critical in future relationships. (Author/JAC)

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Relationship Skills Workshops in University Residence Halls: A Preventive Intervention

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Abstract

This paper describes the design, implementation and evaluation of a preventive intervention within a university residence hall community. The intervention focused on development of interpersonal competence in roommate relationships through relationship skills training in a structured group setting. The intervention was designed to have maximum impact on the community social network. Groups were held in the residence halls for students living within close proximity to each other and were led by resident assistants from within the community. Pre, post and follow-up assessment of personal adjustment, communication competence, communication between roommates, quality of roommate relationships and perceptions of the residence halls' social environment were collected on 79 experimental and 136 control subjects. The level of communication between roommates was found to be significantly related to adjustment, competence, relationship quality and perceptions of the social environment at each assessment. Workshop participation significantly improved communication between roommates. Findings suggest relationship skills workshops within a residential community may facilitate students' adjustment in college and their development of interpersonal competence critical in future relationships.

Relationship Skills Workshops In University Residence Halls: A Preventive Intervention

Background

Difficulty in sustaining positive interpersonal relationships is a pervasive and increasing phenomenon in our society. The rising number of divorces over the last 10 years offers an alarming example of the problem. The devastating effects of disrupted interpersonal relations on society are suggested by the high incidence of psychopathology, alcoholism, suicide, homicide, accident-proneness, and physical illness among persons experiencing marital and family discord (Bloom, 1977). Once a relationship has begun to dissolve there is often little that can be done except assist the participants in their struggle with subsequent difficulties. Frustrated with trying to help after it is already too late, many social scientists strongly advocate "preventive interventions," which endeavor to develop participants' relationship skills prior to the onset of interpersonal difficulties (Guerney, 1977). There is an increasing interest in expanding the focus of these efforts to include participants' social-network (Mitchell & Trickett, 1980) Such interventions seek to enhance interpersonal development through fostering a social milieu which is conducive to positive relationships (Wilcox & Holohan, 1976).

While conceptually attractive, problems in the design, implementation and evaluation of preventive interventions have limited their proliferation (Allred & Graff, 1980). It is difficult to locate and engage a population with an intervention prior to their being identified

by themselves and society as problematic (Goldston, 1977). The vast numbers of potential participants in preventive programs greatly exceed available professional resources for service delivery (Linquist & Love, 1978). There remains debate as to whether the interventions should be focused on individuals, their environment, or both (Henderson et al., 1978). Assessment of the intended effects of preventive interventions require specification of objectives and follow-up contact with participants, both of which are often problematic with diverse and mobile populations (Bloom, 1977). These problems have made it difficult to generate evidence to verify the enthusiastically promised benefits of prevention (Goldston, 1977). Resolving these problems constitutes the challenges of the "engineering phase" (Hobbs, 1964, p. 822) of preventive mental health.

The study reported below offers a response to the challenges of implementing and evaluating a preventive intervention. The intervention was designed to develop the interpersonal competence of young adults while fostering a positive social climate in their living environment. Service delivery by paraprofessionals who were indigenous to the setting offered efficient use of resources, and allowed maximum impact of the intervention on the social system. Follow-up contact with participants allowed for evaluation of the effects of the intervention.

Population

An association between disturbed interpersonal relations and poor adjustment is evidenced among college students. When students first arrive on campus their "psychosocial resources" (Caplan & Grunebaum, 1967) are in a state of flux, putting them in risk of mental disorder. College students are at a developmental stage during which establishing interpersonal relationships is particularly critical (Gazda, 1977). In retrospect most students say the new relationships they developed had the single greatest impact on their college experience (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). Too often this impact is negative. Baker and Siryk (1980) indicate that many students experience social alienation when first attending universities, and decide not to return following their freshman year. There is evidence that the social environment in residence halls is associated with students' feelings of alienation (Goebel, 1976). Students who perceive lower levels of social involvement and emotional support in their residence tend to be more unhappy (Gerst & Sweetwood, 1973) and to develop more physical symptoms (Moos & Van Dort, 1976).

In particular, students' roommates have a substantial effect on their university experience (Einstein, 1967; Heath, 1968). Poor quality relationships between roommates have been shown to be significantly related to students' dissatisfaction with their living situations (Perkins, 1977), poor emotional adjustment (Waldo, 1981), negative perceptions of the university environment and lower G.P.A.s (Pace, 1970).

Similarities between roommates' personality characteristics, demographic backgrounds and interests have not demonstrated a consistent association to positive roommate relationships (Jones et al., 1980). Positive relations have been shown to be typified by roommates more clearly understanding each other's expectations (Nudd, 1962); more openly communicating with each other (Columbro, 1974); and their being able to verbalize to each other their thoughts and feelings about one another (Waldo, 1981). A study by Allred and Graff (1980) has shown that communication training can improve roommates' ability to listen and express themselves to each other.

Analysis of these studies from an ecological perspective (Masterpasqua, 1981) suggests the need for interventions within residence halls which pursue the following two objectives: promotion of individual interpersonal competence and development of an environment conducive to positive relationships. An experience of positive relationships in the residence halls could facilitate students' adjustment, performance and continuance in college. The interpersonal skills which students develop while living on campus could improve the quality of their subsequent relationships as marital partners and parents.

Relationship Skills Workshop

The workshops offer anticipatory guidance with the objective of increasing students' psychosocial resources through development of positive relationships between new roommates. The workshop format includes lectures, demonstrations, assigned readings, and written reports.

Workshop participants engage in structured experiences designed to foster a supportive interpersonal environment during the meetings. Special emphasis is placed on the participants' development of skills at listening with understanding and offering honest self disclosure during difficult interpersonal situations which might arise in roommate relationships. Exercises are employed to develop participants' competence in values clarification, communication and conflict resolution.

Workshops are held at the beginning of Fall semester in the University Residence Halls and are attended by students (primarily freshmen) living within the same communities. Many students attend the workshops with their roommates. Residents receive lower division university credit for participation. Workshops are led by the Resident Assistants (R.A.s) who live within the students' communities and are responsible for the students within the Office of Residential Living organization. The R.A.s receive upper division University credit for leading the workshops.

Method

Procedure

The study reported below was one facet of the University of Maryland's on-going research on relationship quality and adjustment in the residence halls. Volunteers for participation in the study were solicited by Resident Assistants (RA) during their regularly scheduled floor meetings early in Fall semester. Subjects were offered one unit of academic credit. Experimental subjects were offered an opportunity to participate in a 12 hour workshop addressing relationship skills led by their R.A.s at the beginning

of the semester. Control subjects were offered an opportunity to participate in workshops led by R.A.s at the end of the semester. The control subjects' R.A.s did not lead workshops but did participate in the workshops with their residents at the end of the semester. A graduate assistant administered measures in a university classroom durin the first (pre), sixth (post) and twelfth (follow-up) weeks of Fall semester to both experimental and control subjects according to a standardized procedure.

Sample

Two hundred and fifteen subjects participated in the study. One hundred and five were female and 110 were male. Thirty one of the subjects were black, 180 were white and 4 were Asian. There were 86 freshmen, 62 sophomores, 54 juniors, and 13 seniors. Ninety two of the subjects lived in high-rise dorms and 123 lived in low rise dorms.

Experimental subjects (N=79) were recruited by four male and 11 female R.A.s who wanted to lead Relationship Skills workshops with their residents. Control subjects (N=136) were recruited by eight male and seven female R.A.s who had expressed an interest in leading workshops but were unable to due to schedule conflicts or limitations in training resources. The groups were roughly equivalent with regard to year in school and race. Twenty seven percent of the experimental group was male as compared to the control group which was 61% male. Nineteen percent of the experimental group lived in low-rise dorms as compared to 80% of the control group who lived in low-rise dorms.

Instruments

Students' experience of anxiety (A), depression (D) and alcohol use (AU) were measured by their response on a five point likert scale (ranging from 1. very rarely to 5. always) to three statements indicating problems in these areas. The statements were adapted from the "Bell Global Psychopathology Scale " which has been shown to be a reliable and valid instrument for assessing psychological adjustment (Schwab et al., 1979).

Subjects' levels of communication skills were assessed by having them write what they would say to their roommate in four different situations. The situations corresponded to the Verbal Interaction Task (VIT) described by Guerney (1977, p. 361). Subjects wrote how they would respond when listening (L_1) to their roommates' presentation of a personal problem and when listening (L_3) to their roommates' presentation of a conflict their roommate has with them. The responses were later rated according to the Acceptance of Other Scale (AOS) which assesses levels of empathy and respect in communication (Guerney, 1977, p. 364). Subjects also wrote what they would say to their roommate when speaking (S_2) about a personal problem to them and when speaking (S_4) about a conflict they had with their roommate. Subjects' presentations were rated according to the "Self-feeling Awareness Scale" (SFAS) which assesses subjectivity, specificity, and expression of feelings in communication (Guerney, 1977, p. 371). AOS and SFAS ratings of the VIT have been shown to be a reliable and valid method for assessment of communication in interpersonal relations (Guerney, 1977). Written responses to situations which correspond with the VIT are considered to be "quasi-behavioral data" (Guerney et al., 1982, p. 931) and

have been shown to reflect communication behaviors measured by the VIT. Graduate assistants achieved interater reliability of r=.90 or greater before rating the subjects' written responses. Periodic checks on rate re-rate reliability were consistently above r=.90.

The level of communication (C) between roommates was assessed through subjects' self report on the five point likert scale described above to 13 items describing positive communication (Waldo, 1982). The items described efforts to convey understanding and fully disclose perceptions when communicating with their roommate.

The quality of relationship (Q) between roommates was assessed through their response on the likert scale described above to items from an adapted form of the "Interpersonal Relationship Scale" (IRS). The IRS has been demonstrated to be a reliable and valid measure of the level of trust and intimacy in interpersonal relationships (Guerney, 1977). The form used in this study was adapted to specifically address roommate relationships. Previous research has shown that scores on this form are related to roommates' ability to communicate with each other and their emotional adjustment (Waldo & Fuhrman, 1981). For the purpose of the present study the form was shortened to 13 items. Correlations between the short form and longer form have ranged between r=.78 to 4=.98 (Waldo, 1982).

Subjects' perception of the social environment of the residence halls was assessed through administration of the Social Involvement (I) and

Emotional Support (S) scales of the University Residence Environment Scale. The scales have been shown to be reliable and valid measures of social atmosphere which are related to students' emotional (Gerst & Sweetwood, 1973) and physical (Moos & Van Dort, 1976) adjustment.

A random sample of 32 subjects was selected to assess the reliability of measures in the present study. Subjects were assessed during the sixth week of Fall semester and again during the twelfth week of Fall semester. Test re-test reliability coefficients for the six week interval were Anxiety r=.59 (P<.05), Depression r=.65 (P<.05), Alcohol Use r=.35 (P<.05), Listening-Nonconflict Situation r=.82 (P<.05), Speaking-Nonconflict Situation r=.37 (P<.05), Listening-Conflict Situation r=.62 (P<.05), Speaking-Conflict Situation r=.60 (P<.05), Communication r=.55 (P<.05), Relationship Quality r=.65 (P<.05), Involvement r=.57 (P<.05) and Support r=.69 (P<.05).

Results

Correlation coefficients were computed to assess the association between measures at the pretest (see Table 1), post test (see Table 2) and follow-up (see Table 3) intervals. A one tailed test of significance (P<.05) was employed to determine if variables were correlated in the predicted direction. A summary of correlations between measures which were significant at all three intervals follows. Anxiety (A), depression (D), and alcohol use (AU) were strongly related. Depression showed a modest relationship to poor relationship quality (Q) between roommates, and perception of the residence halls' environment as not emotionally supportive (S). There were moderate relationships between all measures

Table 1

Correlations Between Adjustment, Communication Skills, Relationship Quality, and Perceived Social Atmosphere of All Subjects at Pre-Test

N=215

	A	D	AU	L_1	S_2	L_3	S_4	C	Q	I	S
Adjustment											
Anxiety (A)		.63**	.54**	-.02	.08	.07	.08	-.05	-.09	-.13*	-.16**
Depression (D)			.52**	-.03	.10	.12	.10	-.11*	-.19**	-.05	-.19**
Alcohol Use (AU)				.01	.16	.09	.09	-.21**	-.18**	-.04	-.11*
Demonstrated skills											
non-conflict situation											
Listening (L_1)					.35**	.31**	.19**	.17**	.19*	-.05	-.03
Speaking (S_2)						.28**	.30**	.07	.01	-.03	.02
conflict situation											
Listening (L_3)							.41**	.12*	.03	-.11	-.04
Speaking (S_4)								.10*	.08	-.09	-.02
Roommate relationship											
Communication (C)									.63**	.13*	.31**
Quality (Q)										.15**	.31**
Social atmosphere of the residence halls											
Involvement (I)											.52**
Support (S)											

Level of significance, one-tailed test
*P<.05 **P<.01

Table 2

Correlations Between Adjustment, Communication Skills, Relationship Quality, and Perceived Social Environment of All Subjects at Post-Test

N=215

	A	D	AU	L_1	S_2	L_3	S_4	C	Q	I	S
Adjustment											
Anxiety (A)		.56**	.47**	.15	.04	.05	.06	-.02	.02	.00	-.01
Depression (D)			.53**	.02	.04	.02	.06	-.16**	-.09*	-.04	-.13*
Alcohol Use (AU)				.01	.02	.00	.08	-.09*	-.03	.05	-.05
Demonstrated skills											
non-conflict situation											
Listening (L_1)					.26**	.41**	.31**	.06	-.00	-.08	.02
Speaking (S_2)						.20**	.28**	.05	.04	.13*	.04
conflict situation											
Listening (L_3)							.47**	.13*	.05	-.09	.03
Speaking (S_4)								.17**	.17**	.07	.10*
Roommate relationship											
Communication (C)									.68**	.17**	.28**
Quality (Q)										.23**	.26**
Social environment of the residence halls											
Involvement (I)											.46**
Support (S)											

Level of significance, one-tailed test
*P<.05 **P<.01

Table 3

Correlations Between Adjustment, Communication Skills, Relationship Quality, and Perceived Social Environment of All Subjects at Follow-Up

N=215

	A	D	AU	L_1	S_2	L_3	S_4	C	Q	I	S
Adjustment											
Anxiety (A)		.60**	.45**	.02	.09	.11	.15	-.07	-.08	-.03	-.06
Depression (D)			.52**	-.05	.07	.07	.14	-.12*	-.13*	-.11*	-.11*
Alcohol Use (AU)				.06	.00	.08	-.01	-.17**	-.07	-.07	-.03
Demonstrated skills											
non-conflict situation											
Listening (L_1)					.27**	.38**	.27**	.10*	.06	.03	.08
Speaking (S_2)						.25**	.31**	.14*	.13*	.03	.03
conflict situation											
Listening (L_3)							.43**	.13*	.07	-.12	-.10
Speaking (S_4)								.23**	.16**	-.01	.04
Roommate relationship											
Communication (C)									.67**	.13*	.25**
Quality (Q)										.20**	.24**
Social environment of the residence halls											
Involvement (I)											.56**
Support (S)											

Level of significance, one-tailed test
*p<.05 **p<.01

(quasi-behavioral data) of demonstrated communication skills ($C_1S_2L_3S_4$). Subjects who reported higher levels of communication (C) with their roommates also indicated they experience lower levels of depression and problems with alcohol. They demonstrated better listening and speaking skills in conflict situations. The level of communication between roommates was strongly related to the quality of the roommate relationship. Levels of communication between roommates was also related to subjects' perception of the residence halls' community as an involving (I) and emotionally supportive (S) social environment. In addition to previously cited association with measures of depression and levels of communication between roommates, the reported quality of relationship between roommates was moderately related to subjects' perception of involvement and support in the residence halls. Perceptions of social involvement and emotional support in the residence halls' environment were strongly related.

Repeated measures analysis of variance indicated subjects' communication with their roommates showed significant change between assessment periods. Workshop participants had significantly higher levels of communication with their roommates than did those on a waiting list. Increases in communication were significantly associated with workshop participation (see Table 4).

The experimental and control groups showed similar levels of communication at the pre test assessment. The experimental group's level of communication increased following workshop participation and remained higher through the follow-up period. There was little change in the communication between roommates in the control group (see Figure 1).

Table 4

Level of Communication Between Roommates

Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance

Experimental vs. Control. Pre, Post

and Follow-Up

Source	Sum of squares	D/F	Mean Square	F	P<
Group	981	1	981	5.7	.05
Error	36683	213	172		
Trials	869	2	434	11.9	.05
Group/trials	219	2	109	3.0	.05
Error	15592	426	36		

Figure 1

Level of Communication Between Roommates. Mean of Experimental and Control Groups at Pre, Post and Follow-Up Intervals

Pre (first week)		Post (sixth week)		Follow-Up (twelfth week)	
$\bar{X}$	(SD)	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	$\bar{X}$	(SD)
45.5	(8.6)	49.9	(9.1)	47.9	(9.1)
44.4	(8.3)	45.8	(8.8)	45.4	(10.2)

------- Experimental N=79

——— Control N=136

Discussion

Subjects who comprised the sample for this study offer a typical crosssection of the residence halls' population. The higher proportion of female R.A.s who arranged to lead workshops and the large number of females who participated in the Fall workshops may suggest that males and females differ in their level of motivation to work on relationship skills. Use of repeated measures allowed for comparison of experimental and control groups despite differences in sexual make up and dorm type.

The moderate correlations among variables in this study may in part be attributable to the imperfect reliability of measures. Reliability assessments taken over a six week period were generally low. However, the correlations between test retest scores were probably reduced by real deviations in the sample during the six week period. College students constitute a rapidly changing population who can be expected to fluctuate on many dimensions. Low correlations among variables may also be attributable to factors which were not assessed and which differentially affected measured variables. Recent evidence suggests that stressful life events and levels of personal competencies are associated with students' personal, interpersonal and social adjustment (Ostrow et al., 1981).

The significant correlations between variables assessed in this study support theory and previous research on interpersonal relations and college student development. Clearly anxiety, depression and alcohol use are related for college students. Furthermore these indices of personal adjustment are correlated with the quality of their relationship with their

roommate and their perception of involvement and support in their social environment. Central to the association between intrapersonal adjustment and extrapersonal perceptions, the level of communication between roommates showed consistently significant correlations to other variables. Students' ability to demonstrate interpersonal competence in specific listening and speaking skills was significantly related to the level of communication they had with their roommate. The consistent association between these skills and higher levels of communication between roommates suggests that direct skill training can improve roommate communication.

The Relationship Skills Workshops focused on development of interpersonal competence. Significant improvement in communication between roommates following workshop participation indicates the workshops were effective. Communication remained improved through the follow-up period, suggesting that initial efforts to improve relationships had a prolonged effect. Maintenance of improved communication was probably fostered by the fact that residents learned relationship skills together and had ample opportunity to continue to employ the skills with each other in their living environment. The association of level of communication between roommates with other indices of students' adjustment suggest that relationship skills workshops offer a viable preventive intervention for facilitating students' development. Relationship skills that students develop and employ in the residence halls community may improve their future relationships as marital partners and parents.

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